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## Psychoanalytical Tensions and Conflicts of Characters' Interactions in Ian McEwan's *The Cement Garden*

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### Abstract

*The Cement Garden*, first published in 1978, is mainly centred on four traumatized siblings whose parents die suddenly, first the father, then the mother. Encountering this bitter emotional deprivation in their relationships with their primary loved objects, their parents (particularly the mother), the children struggle with their surroundings they reside in in order to survive both physically and emotionally. The novel goes beyond the normal limits in investigating the impact of abnormal situations on human relationships. In this paper, we present a close reading of *The Cement Garden* by elucidating some of the psychoanalytical reflections of Jack, the narrator, and his siblings concentrating on the mother-child theory and interactions between them. Earlier psychoanalytical studies have acknowledged the conflicts in McEwan's works. Nevertheless, in this study, we trace the psychoanalytical origins of the psychic anxieties and tensions into childhood and also highlight a much earlier female (mother) influence. This research aims to explore these psychic anxieties and the influence of this early female figure on the siblings' relationship in the light of object relations theory of the psychoanalysis attributable to the Fairbairnian, Kleinian, and Winnicottian analytic traditions. We will show how deprivation from the establishment of an unsatisfying contact with this primary love object (mother) can wreak havoc in the characters' psyche and cause their ego to move towards establishing relations with their internal objects instead of natural, real objects in their external world.

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## 1. Introduction

The following discussion consists of a close and detailed reading of *The Cement Garden*. In this analytical discussion, we elucidate some of the psychoanalytical preoccupations of Jack and his siblings. We trace and map out a route to the origin of the emotional and psychic anxieties in the light of object relations theory of the psychoanalysis attributable to the Fairbairnian, Kleinian, and Winnicottian analytic traditions which will be weaved in through the discussion of this study. This involves a careful investigation of the mental conflicts ascribed to the fictional characters in *The Cement Garden*.

*The Cement Garden* centres on a small family in a derelict working class home concentrating on four traumatized siblings (Julie, Jack, Tom, and Sue) whose parents die suddenly, first the father, then the mother. The novel goes beyond the normal limits in investigating the impact of abnormal situations on human relationships. It is narrated from the viewpoint of the adolescent boy, Jack, who recounts the events that occurred to him and his family, especially his siblings. After their mother's death, the children decide to bury the body in a trunk, which they later seal with the cement mix left over from their father's unfinished garden project, in the basement. After their parents' death, Julie and Jack find themselves sexually attracted to each other. Sue, the younger sister, is withdrawn and given to writing in her diary and Tom, the younger brother, regresses into his infantile world and likes to be mothered. Without any parent or caregiver, the children live by their own rules in their microcosm. Assuming the role of Mother and Father to their younger brother and sister, Sue and Tom, and Jack and Julie's relationship becomes progressively sexualized.

## 2. Autoerotic Anxieties (Masturbation)

In *The Cement Garden*, McEwan presents Jack, the narrator, as an individual who keeps experiencing frustration and conflicts in his relationships with others. In his object relations contacts (the relationships between the child and the significant people in his life particularly the mother) and within the process of his own sexual development, a large part of Jack's life and dreams have been haunted by his "autoerotic activities", in Fairbairn's terms (1941:33), they refer to masturbation. Deep in his psyche, his consciousness has been preoccupied by guilty sensations. In his strivings to identify himself with his father, and his object relationships with him, Jack is mostly confronted with past traumas due to his father's obsessional characteristics and lack of "emotional assurance" through the communications he has established with his children and particularly with Jack. Based on Fairbairn's ideas, in the absence of such "emotional assurance" the individual's relation with his object both emotionally and sexually is marked by a great deal of psychic tensions. Failure in establishing a satisfactory relation with the objects in outer world, the child will turn to his internalized world to reactivate a safe set of contacts in his psyche with his incorporated objects (Fairbairn, 1941:39).

Jack describes his father as a "frail, irascible, obsessive man" (*The Cement Garden*, 9). In fact the father is an authoritarian who does whatever he likes. He controls the children's behaviours and is only good at making the family members afraid by ordering them around. He feels contempt for them and looks down on them. He orders 15 bags of cement without informing his family, especially his wife. He wants to fence and surround the garden with cement bags and makes a particular world for himself. Finally, the father's last moment, after a heart attack, is ironically in the wet cement patches that he himself created in his garden. His death "seemed insignificant" (*The Cement Garden*, 9) and with little or almost no emotions, his status in the family is expunged from its history. Jack describes the moment his father fell, due to a heart attack, on the newly cemented ground impassively: "I did not

have a thought in my head as I picked up the plank and carefully smoothed away his impression in the soft, fresh concrete” (*The Cement Garden*, 19).

In *The Cement Garden*, The Father seems to be an important internalized object, an inner “dynamic structure” (a structure able to act as an independent agency within the mind) in Fairbairn’s words (1944: 132), that comprises a part of Jack’s life. In Klein (1937:307) ’s view, the role of a father in the child’s life and his adult relationships is understood as “the very important part which the father plays in the child’s emotional life which also influences all later love relations, and all other human associations”. The Father, in this novel, has a narcissistic personality and sadistically quarrels with his wife. As Jack describes: “He [The Father] was so convinced of the sanity of his ideas that through embarrassment, rather than fear, no one spoke against the plan” (*The Cement Garden*, 17). In Jack’s memory, his father is an emotionally unsatisfying person who finds pleasure from playing a series of disgusting jokes on the members of his family and would ridicule their dreams and weaknesses. He would joke “against Sue for having almost invisible eyebrows and lashes, against Julie for her ambitions to be a famous athlete, against Tom for pissing in his bed sometimes” and also against Mother “for being poor at arithmetic, and against me for my pimples which were just starting up at that time” (*The Cement Garden*, 15). Father behaved in such a manner, Jack explains, towards his family but once the children made a comment on the subject of his garden, “he sulked” (*The Cement Garden*, 16), and declines to look at or talk to any of the family members.

For an individual, “a satisfactory adult sexuality depends on his sexuality being established in childhood” (Klein, 1936, 301). Due to the emotional assurance failure, Jack fails to have a satisfactory sexual development. He suffers from the emotional traumas and sexual fixations in building his features of masculinity through identifying with his father, a loved object who fails to play the role of a healthy model adequately and effectively for his son. Here, one could find the root causes of Jack’s perpetually attempting to compensate his emotional traumas through the substitutive satisfaction (masturbation). In Fairbairn (1941:40)’s words:

Frustration of his desire to be loved as a person and to have his love accepted is the greatest trauma that a child can experience; and it is this trauma above all that creates fixations in the various forms of infantile sexuality to which a child is driven to resort in an attempt to compensate by substitutive satisfactions for the failure of his emotional relationships with his outer objects. Fundamentally these substitutive satisfactions (masturbation)...represent relationships with internalized objects, to which the individual is compelled to turn in default of a satisfactory relationship with objects in the outer world.

The process of turning to the substitutive satisfaction like masturbation for a child, represents a complex technique in re-enacting his dealing with an unsatisfactory object relationship and therefore, he turns towards his inner relationships with his tantalizing, satisfactory internalized objects (here, Julie and Sue for Jack) erotically. Engaging with masturbation, Fairbairn explains, is due to an individual’s failure in establishing emotional relations with his external contacts, particularly in achieving his masculine characteristics through identifying with his father in an effective and healthy manner. St Clair (1986:63) states that a person such as Jack “turns to them [his internalized objects] instead of safe and satisfactory relationships with objects in the outer world” in order to “compensate for the failure of emotional relationships with the outer objects.”

Jack’s mother endeavours to assist her son to get him out of his sexual fixations. She strives in friendly ways to make him aware of the actual or potential harm and consequences of his masturbation. In notifying him of the dangers and effects, the mother speaks to Jack, saying:

Have you looked at your eyes in a mirror lately?...your pupils are very large...and there are bags under your eyes even though you've just woken up...Don't think I don't know what's going on. You're growing into a young man now, ...Growing up is difficult, but if you carry on the way you are, you're going to do yourself a lot of damage, damage to your growing body (*The Cement Garden*, 28-29).

Klein (1936:301), in relation to the mother's proper role toward her child's sexual manifestations, states that "the mother must have a really friendly attitude towards manifestations of [the child's] sexuality". So often, Klein says, the mother is "apt to show disgust, harshness or scorn which is both humiliating and detrimental to the child" (301). Jack's mother attempts to restrain him gradually through explaining about the dangers of his masturbatory affairs in a manner befitting a good mother. The strivings of Jack's mother fit Klein's ideas in reference to the role of a good and friendly mother concerning her son's erotic sensations. Klein (1936:301)says that "the child's sexuality is not to be interfered with, the mother might have to restrain him—of course in a friendly way—if he should attempt to take too much liberty with her person".

However, due to the untimely mother's death, Jack has not been able to grow satisfactorily as a healthy adult. In *The Cement Garden*, due to his emotionally unsatisfying father object, Jack does not succeed in establishing a healthy basis of his masculinity features through identifying with the father figure. Jack's autoerotic tensions would most probably come to an end effectively if he did not fail the chance of receiving the "adaption" of his "facilitating environment" (mother, in Winnicott's terms, 1963:85) for a longer time, particularly during his flowing maturational process. We see that it is exactly during his tensely and critical maturational process that Jack is deprived of this facilitating environment as a result of his mother's death. In *The Cement Garden*, besides the consequences of the lack of "emotional assurance" on the part of the Father figure, the absent mother is a contributory factor to Jack's problems.

### 3. Maternal Deprivation

In *The Cement Garden*, unlike the children's (particularly Jack's) relationships with their father, Jack and his siblings have a good bond with their mother who keeps attempting to love and nurture the children. However, the children in *The Cement Garden* face an overwhelming conflict after their mother's death, much worse than at the time of their father's demise. The children, in spite of the freedom which has been granted to them, find their lives empty and hollow. In Jack's reflections:

when Mother died, beneath my strongest feelings was a sense of adventure and freedom which I hardly dared admit to myself and which was derived from the memory of that day five years ago. But there was no excitement now. The days were too long, it was too hot, the house seemed to have fallen asleep (*The Cement Garden*, 71).

Human psyche is frail and easily harmed, and the state of being separated from the primal loved object is unbelievably painful. This situation is truly an "imminent psychic death" in Fairbairn's terms (1944, 113). Hence, just as the field of cement ruins any source of vitality underneath it, the absence of a primary mother for the children in an object-relational human life progressively smothers them, thus disabling them from fostering a healthy set of relationships with the other objects in their lives later. It is the absence of this primal loved object which leads to panicky disorder and to the eventual disintegration of the family members and their inability to establish a healthy set of relationships with each other. When the mother passed away, Jack has just turned fifteen and together with all his siblings are at the stage where they really needed the Mother. On the traumatic condition of Jack after his mother's death, Slay observes that "in his present state he [Jack] has discovered that his authority-free

life is not the adventure he has once envisioned it as being; he realizes that he wants, he needs, parents” once again “to carry and to guide him through his youth” (1991, 118). All of them, particularly Jack and Tom, in this crucial stage of their life yearn to be mothered and “watched over and arranged” through the eyes and agency of a good enough primal loved object (*The Cement Garden*, 132). In this age and period, the mother’s death is a heavy blow, and it is from the moment of their mother’s death that the children find themselves entrapped in a mentally painful world fraught with psychic tensions and struggles.

#### 4. Incest (Disguised Love Making Journey into the Mother)

Soon after their mother’s death, Jack and Julie take over parenting responsibilities. In their world, they do not have any one else but each other. Their total isolation and loneliness together with the absence of their loved objects combined with the tantalizing secret they have and feel, bind them together tightly. This closeness and the sharp need for one another, serve as a route and take them to the final scene in *The Cement Garden*. In the ultimate scene, their incest is the re-enactment of their lost love and their lost loved objects. In their unconscious, through their incestuous affair and taking on the role of their parents, one can infer that, Jack and Julie are most probably attempting to keep their lost loved objects (parents) alive by becoming them. They seem to have a desire for filling in the gap that has been left by their dead parents. From the time their parents died, Jack and Julie take the steps in choosing each other as love-partners. The attachment and feeling of unity between them stem from their inner search for the lost loved objects who share and understand their loneliness and their need for love. Klein comments on incestuous situation such as this stating that:

there are deep unconscious motives which contribute to the choice of a love-partner, and make two particular people sexually attractive and satisfactory to each other. The feelings of a man towards a woman are always influenced by his early attachment to his mother. But here again this will be more or less unconscious, and may be very much disguised in its manifestations (1937, 324).

Jack finds his lost loved object in Julie who has already taken the mother’s place because she takes on features of her mother’s personality. Klein (1937:324) declares that “perhaps the loved woman’s appearance is quite different, but her voice or some characteristics of her personality are in accordance with his early impressions of his mother” and have a particular attraction for him. This can explain Jack’s unnatural feelings for his sister.

As Klein (1957) has stressed that early attachments that a child has towards his mother are of great significance for his later relationships (especially his sexual ones) with other individuals. These early unity or attachments with the mother are firmly rooted in his subconscious and are experienced through bodily communication and contacts by the agency of the Mother’s smell, voice, and her handling and are interpreted by the child as his being fully understood and accepted. In Klein’s words (1957:188), these early attachments and experiences “constitute not only the basis of sexual gratification but of all later happiness, and make possible the feeling of unity with another person; such unity means being fully understood” and are crucial for “every happy love relation”. Klein (1957:188) emphasizes that “at best, such an understanding needs no words to express it, which demonstrates its derivation from the earliest closeness with the mother in the preverbal stage”. This early emotional and physical bonding with mother stays forever in the child’s psyche and plays a fundamental role in his later emotional, loving relationships with the others. In adult lovemaking, communication and “sexual gratifications”, in Klein’s (1957) terms, at the core layers of memory, lies the mother’s bodily, physical

presence. It is the mother who in the deepest dark chamber of the psyche is understood as a physical and emotional entity who protects, loves, and gratifies.

In a family, like Jack's and Julie's where the primal loved object (mother) is absent, "very often, as development proceeds, a sister or a cousin takes the mother's place in the body's sexual phantasies and feelings of love". Therefore, "a man whose choice is influenced by his feelings for his sister, may also seek some maternal traits in his love partner" (Klein, 1937: 324), as portrayed in *The Cement Garden*. On the part of Julie, with her maternal traits, she is sexually attracted to her brother, and hence, rejects her boyfriend who manifests her late father's qualities exactly and chooses her brother as her love partner. Concerning these love making partnerships, Klein (1937:325) comments that whatever factors which influenced the man's feelings for a woman, "similar factors are at work in the woman's choice". She might have had "sexual desires and phantasies as well as maternal feelings towards him [her brother]. She would then seek "a lover...agreeing with this image of a brother rather than one who had qualities of a more fatherly kind". According to Klein, in broken families where the primal loved object (mother) is absent and the early love for the father figure in the family has been shaken due to overwhelming conflict and disappointment, it seems quite probable to experience such disguised love making contact between a female figure having mainly maternal feelings and a love-partner of a brotherly nature.

It could be inferred that a recollection of these early sexual impulses shaped in a love relation is an unconscious memorial searching for the lost love object. The memories and experiences from infancy are sometimes experienced in adulthood. Jack's and Julie's incestuous behaviour might be interpreted as an re-enactment of this memorial searching together with "memories in feelings", memories of lost loved object with a particular sensation, so intensely towards it (Klein, 1957: 180). In this regard, *The Cement Garden* which re-enacts our infantile, peculiar feelings, and experiences, is so powerful and its power is derived from McEwan's skill in verbalizing those infantile, pre-verbal memories and experiences in a clear and striking manner. The sexual scene which is portrayed at the end of *The Cement Garden* expresses the two love-partners' urge to achieve reunion with their lost love object that is absent. Consequently, Jack and Julie sexual union is the representation of substitute primal loved object (mother) and the child. Their love making at the end of *The Cement Garden* is a sharp desire for the re-enactment of a much earlier but equally needed object relation and a desperate means of bonding with primary idealized loved object.

## 5. Conclusion

The present psychoanalytical study on *The Cement Garden* could be illustrated as an extreme example of "maternal deprivation". By revealing the lives of the four children and how they make their choices, McEwan shows their fragility as they make meaning of their lives without their parents' guiding hand. Deprivation of "emotional assurance" in an individual's relations with others particularly during his initial stages of growth and maturation is an overwhelming and critical factor in the study of object relations theory. If ever the child experiences this unusual deprivation (separation), the consequences of his early relationships with objects becomes critically "unsatisfactory", in Fairbairn's terms. Mitchell (1981: 8), in his reference to Fairbairn, states that "It becomes too painful to long for and depend on an object which is physically or emotionally absent a good deal of the time". Consequently, the child "establishes internal objects inside himself, which act as substitutes and solutions for unsatisfying relationships with real external objects". These objects, Mitchell declares, "are wholly compensatory, unnatural and not dictated by the biological object-seeking nature of libido" (ibid). Hence, Mitchell's comments on Fairbairn's ideas, "the greater the degree of interference and deprivation in relations with its 'natural' objects, real people, the greater the need for the ego to

establish relations with internal objects” (ibid), might illustrate the abovementioned consequences of maternal absence or deprivation for Jack and his siblings. It also explains their inclination towards establishing relationships with their inner objects in their internal world.

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